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ABSTRACT

The traditional system of direct instruction focuses on students' acquiring a body of knowledge and developing related skills. It has been recognized for some time now that direct instruction needs to be combined with more humanistic methods of education, which invite students to be more actively involved in the learning process and are focused on affective outcomes of student learning. These outcomes include learning how to learn, enhancing the desire and motivation to learn, and developing the total human potential. Such a system, in which students are meaningfully involved in formulating, hypothesizing, and synthesizing the information as it is taught is most helpful. Cooperative learning theory and strategies can help to provide a framework which can be used to help counselor educators improve the quality of the learning by altering the methods of instruction and the structure of the classroom environment. The amount of professor preparation and classroom involvement remains high within this framework. In summary, cooperative learning groups can improve the quality of learning which occurs within counselor education programs, and can more actively engage students in the learning process. Student evaluations, both formal and informal, appear favorable for professors who have incorporated these group experiences into their classroom repertoire of teaching strategies. These strategies can be helpful to both experienced and inexperienced counselor educators. (Author/ABL)

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# Application of Cooperative Learning Strategies in Counselor Education

## Abstract

How do you learn best? The response to this question may be varied from visually conceptualizing, to verbal rehearsal, to oral repetition, to auditory or tactile stimulation, to a combination of two or more of these methods. Rarely would the response to this question be "I learn best by listening to a lecture." Yet, how many professors rely on the lecture format as their primary mode of instruction? How many students passively copy notes as the professor lectures without processing the information as it is received? The concept of seminar classes as being most appropriate at the graduate level may appear to address this issue by increasing student involvement in the process of learning. However, it appears that for some professors the use of seminars is seen as a means to lighten preparation time rather than as being a more effective mode of instruction.

The traditional system of direct instruction focuses on students' acquiring a body of knowledge and developing related skills. It has been recognized for some time now that direct instruction needs to be combined with more humanistic methods of education, which invite students to be more actively involved in the learning process and are focused on affective outcomes of student learning. These outcomes include learning how to learn, enhancing the desire and motivation to learn, and developing the total human potential. Such a system in which students are meaningfully involved in formulating, hypothesizing, and synthesizing the information as it is taught is most helpful.

Cooperative learning theory and strategies can help to provide a framework which can be used to help counselor educators improve the quality of the learning by altering the methods of instruction and the structure of the classroom environment. The amount of professor preparation and classroom involvement remains high within this framework. But most importantly, students are actively involved in the

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learning process, learn more, retain the information for a longer period of time, and enjoy the process of learning much more as they are engaged more directly (Johnson & Johnson, 1989).

The purpose of this article is to discuss the application of cooperative learning groups and strategies within counselor education curricula. Specific examples of learning activities will be outlined from within a cooperative learning framework.

## Introduction

As with any large institution, it is a beneficial practice for administrators and faculty in higher education to assess the effectiveness of their success in meeting the goal of educating students. An important factor of consideration is the methods of instruction used and how effective these methods are in bringing about the maximum degree of student learning. Advancements within the field of teaching have challenged the historically accepted prototype of the professor as the expert who imparts knowledge to students who are passive vessels waiting to receive words of enlightenment. According to this early paradigm, the process of learning involves an active teacher (the transmitter of knowledge) and a passive student (the receptable of knowledge). The focus of attention in the transmitter model is on the teacher, rather than on the student. More recent paradigms of instruction, focus attention on students learning how to learn and enjoying the process of learning. These paradigms have been referred to as humanistic methods of instruction. Slavin (1991) supports the usefulness of humanistic methods saying:

> "...while we may not be able to measure the effects of humanistic methods as well as we can those of direct instructional methods, if there is one thing research in educational psychology (and particularly in direct instruction) tells us, it is that students learn what they are taught. If we expect students to be independent learners, we must give them opportunities to learn on their own. If we expect students to value learning for its own sake, we must give them exciting and challenging experiences. If we want them to learn to take responsibility, we must give them responsibility." p. 269

Research demonstrates that the amount of information learned and retained is greater if the student is not passive, but rather actively involved in the learning process interpreting, comparing, analyzing, synthesizing and using higher order thinking processes (Johnson &

Johnson, 1989). McKeachie (1988) states,

"Student participation, teacher encouragement, and student-to-student interaction positively relate to improved critical thinking. These three activities confirm other research and theory stressing the importance of active practice, motivation, and feedback in thinking skills as well as other skills. This confirms that discussions, especially in small classes, are superior to lectures in improving thinking and problem solving."

The greatest challenge of an educator is to meaningfully engage students in the process of learning and to motivate them toward conceptualizing learning as a lifelong process. The constructivist model of instruction has offered a new paradigm by reconceptualizing the student as an active component in the learning process. This paradigm involves the recognition that people learn best when they are involved in constructing knowledge within the social context of a group. The professor becomes the guide, leader, monitor, and expert in devising strategies to get students actively involved in learning activities. The roles of student and teacher change just as the types and variety of activities which take place change.

Several models of cooperative learning have been designed in accordance with the constructivist model of teacher and learner. One conceptual approach to cooperative learning was developed by David and Roger Johnson (1974) and involves five basic elements of instruction. These elements include positive interdependence, face-to-face interaction, individual accountability, interpersonal and small group skills, and group processing.

Initially designed to be used with younger students, Johnson and Johnson's model of cooperative learning is applicable to teaching graduate level courses as well. In fact, several of the basic elements draw on concepts basic to interpersonal dynamics and group counseling. Group processing is done after each small group activity to assess the effectiveness of the group in working together on the shared task. There is a focus on improving communication and learning interactional skills.

Counselor Education courses can be taught more effectively and produce longer term retention by employing basic concepts and strategies of the cooperative learning model. Johnson & Johnson (1987,1989) have developed three different types of cooperative groups that can be employed in the classroom. Formal learning groups are the most

structured and are directed toward completing a specific task, which can be completed during a class session or over a period of class meetings. Informal learning groups are less structured and short-term, generally lasting only during one class period . Base groups are long-term in design with the overall purpose of offering support to students and promoting individual accountability. Base groups often meet throughout the semester or over a several year period of time, depending on the structure of the educational program and specific student needs.

The purpose of this article is to discuss specific examples of how these three types of cooperative learning groups can be used within graduate-level Counselor Education courses. Following is a description of each type of group and specific classroom activities which have been found to be successful in Counseling Theories and School Counseling courses.

## Formal Learning Groups

All course assignments and projects can be designed using formal cooperative learning groups. Such activities may include experiental activities, simulations, class presentations or laboratory projects. These specific tasks or assignments may take from several minutes to several class sessions to complete. In addition to teaching the specific academic concepts, principles and strategies the students are to apply, the professor also structures the learning groups and monitors the functioning of each group. The professor functions as both the academic expert and classroom manager. Students are expected to rely on their peers for assistance, feedback, support and reinforcement. They are encouraged to interact, share ideas and materials, support and encourage academic achievement and to hold each other accountable for their learning.

Johnson & Johnson (1991) have outlined the five step process needed to implement formal cooperative learning groups:

1. **Specifying an academic and a collaborative skills objective for the lesson**. These objectives are formulated by the professor, but clearly stated to students before they begin the learning activity.

2. **Structuring the learning groups** . This involves deciding on the size, determining group makeup, arranging the room, and assigning roles within

the group to promote positive interdependence.

3. **Explaining the academic task and goal structure of the activity**. Students should be clear about the assignment, the objectives of the lesson and the criteria of success.

4. **Monitoring and intervening during the learning activity** . The professor moves from group to group to offer any necessary task assistance.

5. **Evaluating and processing the success of the learning experience**. The final part of the process involves providing closure to the lesson by evaluating the quality and quantity of students' learning and processing how well the groups functioned.

These five steps are necessary in successfully structuring and implementing a formal cooperative learning activity. Formal cooperative learning groups can be beneficial in offering students opportunities to be actively involved in applying, analyzing and interpreting knowledge that they have acquired. The following activities have been developed using formal cooperative learning methods within two Counselor Education courses, a Counseling Theories class (#1-4) and a School Counseling class (#5-6).

1. Comparison Charts of Theoretical Perspectives.

Students are divided into groups of three to four and given a large sheet of newsprint and colored markers. As a group, they are to decide on a format in which to compare several counseling theories (academic objective). They may use words, illustrations, figures, or symbols. It is suggested that each group discuss the main similarities and differences between the theories before deciding on the method of comparison (collaborative objective). Once completed, each group presents their work to the rest of the class

2. Academic Controversy

Johnson & Johnson (1989) recognized that one can increase students' emotional involvement in learning by structuring an academic conflict in

which students with incompatible views seek to reach an agreement. With this technique, students are assigned to groups of four, then divided into two pairs. One pair is given the pro position and the other is given the con position on a certain issue. After a time of preparation, each pair presents their position. Pairs reverse perspectives and argue the opposing position. Lastly, they are asked to reach concensus on a final position that is supported by facts and logic (academic objective). All members must be able to explain and defend the final position (collaborative objective).

An example of a topic for academic controversy in a Counseling Theories class may be "Psychoanalytic theory has outlived its usefulness" or "Counselors-in-Training should be required to participate as a client in personal counseling". In a School Counseling course the topic could be "A school counselor's most important role is that of consultant" or "All school counselors should have teaching experience". Structured controversies maximize student involvement and force students to look at all angles of a particular issue.

3. Case Study Analyses

In teaching counseling theories, it is recognized that it is important not only to teach the basic concepts and principles of the major theorectical approaches, but also provide students with opportunities to apply the theoretical concepts to actual case studies. Therefore, a formal group activity which can be helpful is to ask students to complete a case conceptualization (summary of client problem and related concerns, a list of therapeutic goals, suggested techniques, and statement of how the therapist will know when the goals of therapy have been reached) of a fictional client using each of the theoretical perspectives (academic objective). Giving each working group only one copy of the case summary form, promotes cooperation and joint effort. The groups are asked to decide on a group response to each item before writing in the response (collaborative objective). One member from each group is randomly chosen to present their case conceptualization to the class.

4. Theoretical Perspectives and Key Terms

After choosing a partner, each student pair is given a list of theoretical terms and asked to match each term to the corresponding counseling

theory (academic objective). Then, in groups of four, the students are given a master copy of the answer sheet to be completed after concensus is reached. The group records each term under the appropriate theory (collaborative objective). Disagreements generally arise within these groups, encouraging further discussion. This activity provides an excellent means of review of the major concepts of each theory.

5. Lesson Plan Development

Students preparing to be school counselors may or may not have had previous teacher preparation or experience. This learning activity is designed particularly for those students who have not had such training to familiarize them with techniques in good lesson development.

Demonstrate an activity which could be used as part of a guidance lesson. Ask student pairs or groups to write a lesson plan for a grade level of their choice. They are to include the activity as part of the lesson, but to expand the lesson with additional material. The students are to identify the competency, goals/objectives, procedure, materials, and method of evaluation (academic objective). The students can then be asked to present their lesson to the larger group (collaborative objective).

6. Joint Projects

Generally organized as student pairs or in small groups, students are assigned a project requiring cooperative effort to complete. For example, small groups of students in a Developmental School Counseling course can be asked to write either a large group or small group guidance unit within a topical area of their choice (collaborative objective). They need to specify the age group and length of sessions. The final written project includes a list of goals of the unit, an outline of the topics addressed, and five lesson plans (academic objective). Each lesson plan includes the session title, student competency, measurable objectives, procedures and activities, resources needed, and means of evaluation. In addition to completing the written project, each group member also chooses one of the five lessons to present during class. This project is particularly helpful to the students who have not had formal preparation or experience as a teacher.

## Informal Cooperative Learning Groups

These groups differ from formal learning groups in that they generally last for only one class period. The purpose of informal groups is to focus attention on the material being presented, ensure that students are cognitively processing what is being discussed and/or provide closure to the class. These techniques are especially helpful during lectures to maintain student attention and increase student involvement. Although using these techniques slightly cuts down on lecture time, they do enhance the learning that occurs. Rather than students being allowed to take notes passively, they are involved in structured sharing activities before, during and after the lecture material is presented.

The first task is for the professor to plan his/her lecture around a series of questions that the lecture answers. Then he/she can use these questions at the beginning or end of the lecture to focus the students' attention on the topic of the lesson. The professor can also use these questions throughout the lecture by asking the students to turn to a partner and discuss their response. According to Johnson & Johnson (1989), a short discussion task should be given every 10-15 minutes. These tasks are time efficient in that they need only require 2 to 4 minutes for students to complete.

During a lecture in a Counseling Theories course, the students may be asked to turn to their neighbor and give a personal reaction to a concept of the theory being presented. Or during a lecture to school counseling students on the role of the counselor as consultant, the students may be shown videotaped vignettes of a high school class and then asked to formulate a feedback response to the teacher about the behavior problem.

These techniques are very beneficial to student learning because they directly engage the student in thinking about and discussing the material as it is being presented. They encourage student to student interaction which most often leads to increased student interest and attention. They allow the students to verbalize their understanding of the concepts being discussed which increases student comprehension and retention. The positive educational benefits of informal cooperative learning strategies are noteworthy and they take a relatively short amount of time to implement.

## Base Groups

Base groups are the most long-term of the three types of cooperative learning groups. Generally base groups extend over the course of a full-semester. These groups are similar in philosophy to support groups. Since members have the opportunity to work together over a longer period of time, they can be instrumental in offering support and encouragement to one another. The purpose of the base group is to provide the student with a home, a place to belong within the educational setting. They share the common goal of completing a particular course successfully. Base groups can be structured according to the specific purposes and circumstances of the school program.

In a Counseling Theories course, for example, students can be invited to join a base group with 2 to 3 other students who share either a common class schedule or commute from the same geographical area. The base groups can be utilized in a variety of ways within Counselor Education programs. Students can meet with their base group at the beginning of each class session to check in with one another, offer support, and formulate a list of questions regarding the reading assignment that they want addressed. During class time, the base groups can be used for structured activities. The groups were also can be encouraged to meet outside of class for study sessions once a week throughout the semester. Group members can provide for one another in case of absence, assist one another regarding questions related to course assignments or projects, and provide written and oral feedback to one another on written assignments so that revisions and improvements can be made before submitting final projects. Students in base groups who meet together on a weekly basis for study sessions have responded very favorably to the helpfulness of their group experience and also tended to score higher on class exams. Base groups not only offer a medium of support for students, but also encourage team effort, varied perspectives and shared responsibility.

## Summary

Cooperative learning groups can improve the quality of learning which occurs within Counselor Education programs. Cooperative learning groups

(formal, informal and base groups) more actively engage students in the learning process than the traditional method of direct instruction. Student interest and motivation for learning increase. Student evaluations, both formal and informal, appear favorable for professors who have incorporated these group experiences into their classroom repertoire of teaching strategies. These strategies can be helpful to both experienced and inexperienced Counselor Educators.

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